

MGNREGA ON THE TOUCHSTONE OF MEETING THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF SPECIFIC CATEGORIES: A STUDY IN SANGRUR AND BARNALA DISTRICTS OF PUNJAB INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most wide ranging flagship programmes of Govt. of India. Conceived in the year 2005 as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and later rechristened as MGNREGA, (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) provides for guaranteed employment for 100 (hundred) days in a year to adult members of a rural household registered under the Act. The primary and foremost objective of the programme is to ensure livelihood to rural masses especially during the lean season of the agricultural cycle when demand for labour is low. This welfare intervention of the Govt. is to mitigate hunger, starvation and deprivation in rural India and to ensure living wages to the adult members of a rural household who come forward to seek unskilled manual labour work as per the provisions of the Act. The prime objective of the present study is to ascertain the efficacy of the MGNREGA in meeting with the specific needs of specific (vulnerable) groups in two districts of Punjab where agriculture is crucial to the economy and life and style of the people.

KEYWORDS : MGNREGA, MGNREGS, Asset Creation, Social Distress, Social Security, Vulnerable Groups, Agricultural Cycle, Poverty Alleviation, Community Assets, Gram Panchayat, Rural Development, Job Card, House Holds, Unskilled Manual Labour Work, Livelihood Security, Employment Guarantee, Work Site Facilities, Line Department & Convergence

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INTRODUCTION AND CULMINATION OF THE MGNREGA

India is a country characterized by a very large labour force in informal sector, which is either casual or self employed and comes from rural areas and it goes without saying that employment in agriculture is vastly influenced by the agricultural cycle. It is during the lean period of agricultural cycle when a large labour force becomes vulnerable to hunger and starvation. Unfortunately the labour in informal sector is not ensured legal protection, health and other benefits as are available to the workers of formal sector (1) Faced with such a situation there was a need to evolve a scheme through guaranteed employment to ensure security of livelihood, alleviate hunger, starvation and deprivation, reduce distress migration from rural to urban areas and offer benefits of such an all inclusive scheme particularly to vulnerable specific groups comprising women, the disabled, the old and individuals / households belonging to SC and ST categories. Thus, came National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, in the year 2005 and later renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

(MGNREGA) whereby the Sampoorana Gramin Rozgar Yojana (2001) and FWP (2001) were merged. The preamble to MGNREG Act states that it is an “Act to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work” (GOI-2005)(2)

MGNREGA AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

The MGNREGA Operational Guidelines (3) (4th edition -2013) envisages a strategy to deal with specific vulnerable groups. Chapter 9 of the guidelines identifies Persons with disabilities, Primitive Tribal Groups, Nomadic Tribal Groups, De-notified Tribes, Women in special circumstances, Senior citizens above 65 years of age, HIV positive persons, internally displaced persons as vulnerable groups requiring special focus. It has been specifically mentioned that each State Government should formulate a specific plan to include these special categories in MGNREGA. MGNREGA has several gender sensitive features that are attractive for women workers. The Act stipulates that priority shall be given to women in terms of implementation & mandates that a minimum of one-third of the beneficiaries are to be women who have registered and have requested for work (Schedule II, Section 6 of MGNREGA). The strategy has to be different for different special categories. The plan for these special categories may have the following components:

- Specific works identified for these groups
- Provision within the MIS for tracking their coverage and further each State Government should designate one officer in each District as a Coordinator (Vulnerable Groups) who will exclusively look after the needs and requirements of the special categories and create enabling conditions for their inclusion in MGNREGA works. It is the duty of the state govt. to identify specific works, which can be done by the disabled and vulnerable persons. In a village, different categories of persons with disabilities will be organized to come together as a fixed group to accomplish the works proposed for them under the Scheme, in a way that makes it possible for them to exercise their choice. On no grounds, should the disabled and vulnerable persons be paid lower wages as compared to other persons employed in MGNREGA works and efforts should be made to ensure that the special category persons are given work close to their place of residence so that they need not travel long distances for MGNREGA works and should be given preference for appointment as mates for MGNREGA works and as workers for providing drinking water, to manage crèches etc. at the work sites. Widowed women, deserted women and destitute women are highly vulnerable and require special attention. The guidelines urge Gram Panchayats (GP) to identify such women and ensure that they are provided 100 days of work. Pregnant women and lactating mothers (at least upto 8 months before delivery and 10 months after delivery) should also be treated as a special category. Special works which require less effort and are close to their houses should be identified and implemented for them. Senior citizens particularly those who are not being taken care of by their families look up to MGNREGA for support. They should also be treated as a special category. They are often marginalized and excluded from labor groups due to their lower out-turn and lesser physical ability. Exclusive senior citizen groups may be formed and special works which require lesser physical effort identified and allotted to these groups.

MGNREGA in Sangrur and Barnala Districts of Punjab

The Sangrur and Barnala districts are located in South and South-West of Punjab where agriculture is predominant occupation. Annual rainfall is low(50-70 cm) as compared to Northern districts and cropping pattern is characterized by availability of irrigation facilities through tubewells (power based) and canal system comprising micro

irrigation channels which are fairly developed. Availability of canal water and high density of tubewells has put great pressure on the natural and underground water resources and the level of water table is receding at an alarming rate. Currently the depth of water table ranges from 12.25 m to 30.15 m below ground level in Sangrur and it varies from 14.43 m to 24.82 m below ground level for Barnala Distt. (4) A very high level of mechanization in agriculture has been achieved in the two districts under consideration and the farming community hasn't been come out of its dependence on traditional wheat-paddy agricultural cycle. Clearly the demand for labour in the two districts is highly cyclic and dependent on cropping pattern. From MGNREGS's point of view Punjab has 22 districts and 147 blocks, 12.03 lakh households were issued job cards in 2015-16 of which SC & ST households comprised 72.35 % and 0.3% of the total respectively. 7480 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year 2015-16 in the state.

As per latest data available, Sangrur district has 10 blocks and there were 70,452 registered households in the year 2015-2016 of which SCs formed (54,528 HHs) 77.39% and ST's 0.01 % only. A total of 330 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year under considerations.

The district of Barnala had 23,397 registered households of which SCs constituted 86.16 % and STs 0.039% only. 145 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year 2015-16 in the district which has 3 blocks. (Data culled from <http://nrega.nic.in> Reports, Districts). The districts under consideration generated 33,399 and 14,982 person days of employment in the year ending March 2016 through MGNREGA against 760, 872 man days generated in the whole state.

THE METHODOLOGY

The appraisal has been carried out in all the ten blocks of Sangrur and three blocks of Barnala, selecting at least 2 villages from each block. The data has been generated through site visits, personal interviews of the beneficiaries, Gram Panchayat and MGNREGA officials. The ten blocks falling under the administrative precincts of Sangrur are Ahmedgarh, Anndana, Bhawanigarh, Dhuri, Dirba, Lehragaga, Malerkotla, Sangrur, Sherpur and Sunam. The three blocks namely Barnala, Mehal kalan and shehna fall in the Barnala district.

The MGNREGA officials and Gram Panchayat members including Sarpanches / Pardhans were specifically asked "Whether specific works have been selected keeping in view the specific requirements of women /the elderly /The handicapped or differently abled beneficiaries " and " whether any specific worksite facilities to meet with the requirements of women such as separate bathrooms, crèches and cooking facilities were provided." The women beneficiaries were asked "How was the remuneration received as wages under MGNREGA utilized by them " and " What did they like the most about MGNREGA ". The inclusion of the vulnerable groups under MGNREGS in the thirteen blocks of the two districts has critically been analyzed so as to ascertain the participation of the women and the BPL families as well as the differently abled and elderly persons.

THE APPRAISAL

In the table 1 below pertaining to the labour classification, vulnerable households in the two districts under study have been compared to those in Punjab State. It can easily be deduced that the percentage of vulnerable households (HHs) identified in the two districts is fairly high as compared to the percentage for the whole state.

Table 1: Labour Classification

| S.No | District | Regd. Households | SCs | STs | Minority | BPL | Vulnerable HHs |
|------|----------------|------------------|--------|-----|----------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | Barnala | 23397 | 20159 | 19 | 2 | 1787 | 20645 |
| 2 | Sangrur | 70452 | 54528 | 28 | 22 | 6806 | 58782 |
| | Punjab (State) | 1203567 | 870881 | 277 | 4804 | 59182 | 916845 |

It is intriguing to note that the percentage of handicapped persons who actually worked under MGNREGS is lowly 43.4% and 48.3% for Barnala and Sangrur districts, though it is higher than the 29.4% for the state. Again the average person days, generated for this category is not encouraging as is suggested by Table-2.

Table 2: Handicapped Regd and Person Days Generated

| S.No | District | Registered Persons | No. of Persons Who Actually Worked | Person Days Generated |
|------|----------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Barnala | 214 | 93 (43.4%) | 2457 (28 Avg. Days) |
| 2 | Sangrur | 176 | 85 (48.3%) | 1220 (15 Avg. days) |
| | Punjab (State) | 2367 | 777 (29.4%) | 19466 (25 Avg. days) |

Table-3 depicts the person days generated and employment generated during the financial year 2015-16. The average person days generated per woman is 24 days and 20 days approx. for Barnala and Sangrur districts, where as this figure stands at 25.4 days for the state of Punjab, The average person days of employment generated per household stands at 28 days for Barnala and 23days for Sangrur district. For the Punjab state it is approx. 30 days per household.

Table 3: Employment Generated During the Financial Year 2015-16

| S.No | District | No of Households(HHs) Provided Employment | | | Employment to No of Women | | Person Days Generated | | | | |
|------|----------|---|-----|--------|---------------------------|--------|-----------------------|------|-------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| | | SC | ST | Others | Total | | SC | ST | Others | Total | Women |
| 1 | Barnala | 14514 | 4 | 1444 | 15962 | 12257 | 405386 | 49 | 40135 | 445570 | 293100 (Avg. 24 days) |
| 2 | Sangrur | 25091 | 5 | 5402 | 30498 | 21373 | 576613 | 61 | 117599 | 694273 | 421767 (Avg. 20 days) |
| 3 | Punjab | 369138 | 117 | 104751 | 474006 | 329453 | 1107227 21 | 3212 | 335853 3 | 11408446 6 | 8370686 (Avg. 25.4 days) |

| Families Completed 100 days | | | |
|-----------------------------|----|--------|-------|
| SC | ST | Others | Total |
| 134 | 0 | 11 | 145 |
| 266 | 0 | 64 | 330 |
| 5400 | 1 | 2079 | 7480 |

(Table 1, Table 2 & Table 3 Culled from nrega.nic.in reports districts)

Thus, clearly MGNREGS stands out as far as provision of employment for women in rural areas is concerned. Keeping in view the general perception that women suffer from lack of awareness and skills which is further compounded by hardships in unskilled manual labour, it won't be an exaggeration to say that MGNREGS in the two districts has more or less been able to provide woman empowerment through remunerative employment by generating more than seven lakh person days of employment for women in the year 2015-2016. We must not forget that equal wages for men and women are envisaged under MGNREGS which is conspicuously absent in manual labour market in the whole of India.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In none of the villages in the two districts under study specific works had been selected for the sub-groups comprising women, the elderly and the handicapped. In fact the count of the handicapped or differently abled persons registered in the two districts under the MGNREGS is abysmally low. The Gram Panchayat members were mostly oblivious of the provision under the scheme regarding selection of works for this category of beneficiaries.

The elderly, the women and the differently abled worked alongside other beneficiaries. At Karamgarh village in Barnala block of Barnala district and Namol village of Sunam block under Sangrur district, the works related to renovation and digging of traditional water bodies was in full swing at the time of field survey. A distinct camaraderie was observed at these two places where the elderly and the women were assigned comparatively lighter duties of moving earth in cauldrons while the young and able bodied persons carried out spade work. No distinct bias against the women and the elderly was observed.

But at the same time it is ironical to note that no separate work site facilities for women were available in all the 28 villages in the two districts selected for study.

Women brought cooked lunch from home, a pitcher of water was filled from the nearest source of potable water and shade of a tree provided respite from the blazing sun. In Punjab Angnwari centers serve as crèches to take care of children generally 2 to 4 years old. Makeshift bath rooms weren't provided at any of the worksites.

As far as the utilization of wages received through MGNREGA is concerned nearly 90% of the women responded that the remuneration was used for buying grocery items and running the kitchen. A meager 2% used the money earned to pay fee for school going children and another 3% to meet with medical expenses. This is an indicator that MGNREGS is primarily serving the purpose of mitigation of hunger and starvation and ensuring livelihood security to some extent only when seen in conjunction with the fact that the average per capita women-person days generated in the two districts of Barnala and Sangrur was below 30 days in the year 2015-16.

The most liked aspect of MGNREGA by the woman folk is that the work was provided in the village or near the village and they were not as much impressed by the provisions such as guarantee of work, facilities at work sites or job at the trough of agricultural cycle. The factors about MGNREGS disliked the most were discontinuous nature of work, delay in payment of wages, wage rate & facilities at work in that order. Clearly dissatisfaction with wages stood at a lower rung as compared to other factors.

Very rarely the beneficiaries could make any savings out of the received wages. Nevertheless, the women and the elderly were more or less satisfied with the wage rates under MGNREGS. Perhaps they were fully aware of the bias against hiring them for manual unskilled labour in open market.

In a similar study carried out in the two districts pertaining to creation of durable assets established that no work involving land development belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes had been undertaken in the year 2015-16.(5) Creation of durable community assets are generally preferred to creation of individual assets.

In order to make MGNREG Scheme more efficacious for the vulnerable groups particularly the women, the elderly and the persons with disabilities, implementation of the Report of the Working Group on Specific Needs of special categories under MGNREGA, July 2010(6) (formed under Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India) can be of great help. Undisputedly the measures should be taken to ensure gender equality, meet with specific requirements of the disabled and old persons and to offer special benefits to SC/ST households and minorities.

The first and foremost priority should be to reduce the dependence of these vulnerable groups on MGNREGS through skill development so as to graduate them to semiskilled and skilled levels in order to make them eligible for self employment. MGNREGA –Skill Development Centers can be set up in each district with monthly training modules on masonry, carpentry, horticulture pickle making, vermicompost development, toy making, weaving, cooking and food

processing etc. The trainees may be paid full wages at MGNREGA- wage rates during the period of training. Separate shelf of works involving less strenuous manual physical effort like vermicomposting, forestry, horticulture, floriculture on village common lands is prepared for the women, the disabled and the elderly persons. Overriding preference may be given to persons from these groups for employment as mates, technical assistants and social auditors depending upon their skills.

Flexible timings like four hours a day be treated as half day work and women and the disabled be allotted works for double the number of days of four hours each. Widows, deserted and separated women and differently abled persons should be treated as separate households and job cards be provided accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS

The MGNRGS-officials may mobilize persons with disabilities for maximum enrolment and in the matters of selecting works site (if works are in progress at multiple sites), priority should be given to their preferences.

The participation levels in the scheme being very low among the women from minorities, special awareness drive to break cultural taboos should be planned for their inclusion in the programme.

A small and separate cell at the state level and positioning of one official at district level to monitor the availability of facilities and enforcement of rights and entitlements for the vulnerable groups may be created.

Capacity building through skill training centres, infrastructure & creation of durable assets through convergence, synergy with line departments and strengthening of delivery system is the need of the hour to safeguard the socio economic rights of vulnerable groups.

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